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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [SMIG](#) [BB](#) [XL](#)  
SUBJECT: PROFILE OF BARBADOS OPPOSITION LEADER DAVID THOMPSON

Classified By: DCM Mary Ellen T. Gilroy for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

**¶1.** (C) Summary: In a September 11 meeting with PolOff, leader of the opposition Democratic Labour Party (DLP) David Thompson sought to portray his party as the party of the "common man," who will rise up in the next election to defeat the Barbados Labour Party (BLP), which has ignored his interests for too long. Since the DLP's annual conference in late August, Thompson has stepped up his public attacks on the BLP. He is calculating that issues such as land sales, immigration, and public finance will bring to the polls at the next election all those who have felt marginalized and threatened by the changes implemented by the BLP. If he is right, the DLP's "comeback kid" could become Barbados' comeback kid, but it remains to be seen whether he can sustain his current momentum and whether the voters will consider the DLP ready and able to govern effectively. End Summary.

**¶2.** (C) David Thompson, a former Minister of Finance in the 1990's and a long-time DLP stalwart, met with PolOff on September 11 to discuss the current political situation in Barbados and his party's prospects in the next election, which must be called no later than 2008. Thompson was candid about the rifts that had threatened his party in 2005 and early 2006, when his key political rival within the DLP, Clyde Mascoll, crossed party lines and joined the BLP-led government of Prime Minister Arthur. Thompson admitted that he had to work hard to unify the party and consolidate his authority, but noted that the DLP is now better prepared to contest the next elections. With regard to the campaign and electoral system in Barbados, Thompson gave it a qualified passing grade, noting that campaign finance reform and media reform were still needed. He complained that the government-owned Caribbean Broadcast Corporation is far from neutral to the disadvantage of the DLP. He was also concerned about what he perceives as a lack of access to media outlets outside the campaign season.

**¶3.** (C) Turning to the next elections, Thompson thought that they would be more issue- and personality-driven than before. He noted that the strong party loyalty of his parents' generation has weakened and voters are now more interested in the issues that affect their daily lives. They are also more aware of the candidates as people, whose private lives, as a result, may receive more scrutiny than was the case in prior elections. Thompson thought that the latter trend might be due to influences of the United States and its political process. On the issues that matter to the voters, Thompson

clearly thinks that the DLP has the upper hand. He views the drive of the BLP-led government to open Barbados to foreign investment and to liberalize its labor market as policies that will backfire on the government. With regard to public debt, Thompson expressed concern that the government is not being honest about the full extent of the problem.

#### Land

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¶4. (SBU) In his address to the DLP annual conference on August 23, Thompson seized on an issue which has been garnering more and more public attention in recent weeks: the sale of land to foreign investors. He suggested that the BLP's support for foreign investment has been motivated by more than creating an investment-friendly climate: "As long as the big bucks roll into the coffers of the BLP because of certain decisions in relation to water zones, planning permissions and the like, the government cares not how many Barbadians can afford land and homes." Since his August address, Thompson has returned to this issue again and again in public appearances and interviews, having calculated that public concerns about the skyrocketing real estate prices make this issue a political winner for the DLP.

¶5. (SBU) Thompson is by no means waging a lone crusade. Other prominent Barbadians have registered their concerns about foreign land ownership. For example, in an impassioned speech at the August 26 opening of the annual congress of the Barbados Workers Union, its general secretary, Sir Roy Trotman, appealed to political leaders to protect the heritage of Barbados and ensure that public access to places like Bathsheba and Miami Beach is preserved. It is clear that Thompson thinks that the more attention that is paid to this issue the better, since the DLP would likely reap the

resulting benefits at the ballot box. How Thompson would square any policies limiting foreign investment with Barbados' obligations under the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) remains unclear, but in his August 23 address he did note admiration for Prime Minister Gonsalves of St. Vincent and the Grenadines for managing to "protect the interests of his people in relation to the sale of land to non-Vincentians under the existing CARICOM treaty obligations."

#### Immigration

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¶6. (SBU) In adopting the issue of immigration as another plank in the DLP platform, Thompson again seeks to seize an issue that has received public attention and reflects the Barbadians' unease about some aspects of regional integration and globalization. In his August 23 address to the DLP conference, Thompson called for "properly managed immigration policy, which respects the need for freedom of movement but will carefully ensure that our country's capacity to carry any influx of labor is not detrimental to those we have invited to our shores or to us as Barbadians." The discussion with PolOff revealed that Thompson would make a distinction between professionals and laborers, when it comes to immigration policy. Professionals, who are already free to move across the Caribbean, do not pose a problem for Thompson, since the professionals' pay and standards of living are roughly equivalent in the region, so no one country would likely see an overwhelming influx or loss of professionals. It is the lower-wage workers, whose flow must be controlled, said Thompson. Thompson alluded to the "U.S. problem with Mexicans," and although he did not elaborate, press has reported on Barbadian workers' fears of racial tensions and of pay being depressed by cheaper immigrant labor.

#### Public Finance

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¶7. (C) Returning to his old Minister of Finance portfolio, Thompson expressed concerns about the true extent of Barbados' public debt. The press has been steadily reporting on the cross-party skirmishes over the public debt, and so far, no party has gained the upper hand. Thompson noted

confusion over statistics provided by the government and worried that even if the government were to concede that the debt is closer to 98 percent of GDP, rather than the lower figures being cited, even the 98 percent may not be high enough if all "other government activities" were factored in.

According to Thompson, Barbados has much less "elbow room" now than in the 1990's, with much higher interest payments on the debt and decreasing foreign exchange reserves over the past 15 months. While this issue may not resonate as well with the electorate, Thompson has used it not only to focus the public's attention on what he portrays as mismanagement of public finances by the government, but also to settle some personal scores with Clyde Mascoll, who upon leaving the DLP became a junior Minister of State in the Finance Ministry.

#### Biographic Note

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**¶18.** (U) At 44, Thompson already has more than 25 years of active political life behind him. His mother was an energetic DLP supporter and encouraged Thompson's interest in politics. He has been a member of the DLP since 1978, having headed the DLP's youth arm, the Young Democrats, and eventually progressing to more senior positions of assistant general secretary, general secretary, and president. He was first elected to the Parliament in 1987, having won the St. John constituency in a by-election, following the death of the legendary DLP leader and Prime Minister Errol Barrow. He became Barbados' youngest Finance Minister at 31.

**¶19.** (U) His political fortunes turned, however, with the DLP's general election defeats in 1994 and 1999. He resigned his DLP leadership position after the 1999 defeat, but came back and remained DLP president until September 2001, when he resigned again, following another DLP defeat in a by-election.

**¶10.** (U) Although he retained his seat in the Parliament, Thompson temporarily retired from the political limelight and focused on his private law practice. He studied law in the 1980's at the University of the West Indies, where he

graduated with honors, and at the Hugh Wooding Law School in Trinidad and Tobago. He was admitted to practice law in Barbados in 1986. Since 1994, he has been a partner in the law firm Thompson and Patterson. He has also developed an active consultancy, having worked in Africa and the Caribbean, including a current project of advising the government of St. Kitts and Nevis on constitutional reforms.

**¶11.** (U) In August 2005, Thompson was again elected as DLP president, and eventually gained control over the DLP as the leader of the opposition, following the January 2006 departure from the party of his chief rival, Clyde Mascoll. Since January, Thompson has worked diligently to consolidate his control over the DLP and reestablish himself as a leading political figure in Barbados, in preparation for the next elections.

**¶12.** (U) Thompson is married and has three children.

#### Comment

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**¶13.** (C) Last year, when Thompson returned to DLP leadership, one political commentator called him the "comeback kid." Since then, Thompson has sought to solidify his party's support, put his stamp on the DLP's direction, and now to energize the electorate in anticipation of the next election.

Although the next election is not expected to be called for at least another year, Thompson is seeking early gains by capitalizing on the current disaffection in some parts of the electorate with Prime Minister Arthur's government. While it is difficult to predict the policies that Thompson would seek to implement if the DLP were to win the election, his focus on foreign ownership of land and immigration could mean tighter government regulations in both areas.

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